

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SP-02 USIA-06 AID-05 EB-08 NSC-05
TRSE-00 SS-15 STR-07 OMB-01 CEA-01 CIAE-00
COME-00 FRB-03 INR-10 NSAE-00 XMB-02 OPIC-03
LAB-04 SIL-01 IGA-02 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 L-03
PA-01 /098 W

-----046898 161740Z /41

R 161712Z FEB 78
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3232
INFO AMCONSUL BELFAST
AMCONSUL EDINBURGH

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 02681

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, PDEV, UK
SUBJECT: DEVOLUTION: GOVERNMENT AGAIN BEATEN ON
SCOTLAND BILL

REF: LONDON 158L

SUMMARY - THE GOVERNMENT'S DEVOLUTION PLANS WERE
AGAIN HAMMERED BY COMMONS FEBRUARY 15 WHEN ATTEMPTS,
FIRST, TO REMOVE THE 40 PERCENT REFERENDUM REQUIREMENT
(REFTEL) AND, THEN, TO WATER IT DOWN, WERE DEFEATED
BY SUBSTANTIAL MARGINS. THE GOVERNMENT'S EARLIER
CONFIDENCE THAT THE 40 PERCENT ENDORSEMENT REQUIREMENT
COULD BE DEFEATED WAS BASED ON EXPECTATIONS OF
CONSERVATIVE SUPPORT WHICH FAILED TO MATERIALIZE IN
NUMBERS LARGE ENOUGH TO OFFSET THE DEFECTIONS OF
LABOR BACKBENCHERS. THESE DEFEATS ARE NOT EXPECTED
TO AFFECT THE GOVERNMENT'S ABILITY TO REMAIN IN POWER,
BUT THEY WOULD APPEAR TO PROVIDE THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL-
LISTS WITH AN ISSUE THEY CAN USE TO INCITE SEPARATIST
FEELING IN SCOTLAND. END SUMMARY
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1. THE HOUSE OF COMMONS FEBRUARY 15 SUSTAINED ITS
EARLIER JUDGEMENT THAT DEVOLUTION IN SCOTLAND WILL
DEPEND ON ENDORSEMENT OF THE SCOTLAND ACT BY 40
PERCENT OF THOSE ELIGIBLE TO VOTE WHEN IT REJECTED
GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO: A) RESCIND THE OFFENDING AMEND-
MENT AND, B) SUBSEQUENTLY, REDUCE THE REQUIRED LEVEL

OF SUPPORT FROM 40 TO 33 PERCENT OF THE ELIGIBLE ELECTORATE. THE ATTEMPT TO STRIKE THE 40 PERCENT REQUIREMENT FAILED BY 298 TO 243, A MAJORITY OF 55 AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT. THE EFFORT TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF VOTERS REQUIRED FOR APPROVAL FROM TWO-FIFTHS TO ONE-THIRD WAS THEN DEFEATED BY 285 TO 240, A MAJORITY OF 45. LEADER OF THE HOUSE MICHAEL FOOT LATER TOLD COMMONS THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL ACCEPT ITS VERDICT.

2. WE UNDERSTAND FROM GOVERNMENT BUSINESS MANAGERS THAT THEIR EARLIER BELIEF THAT THEY COULD OVERTURN, OR AT LEAST WEAKEN, THE 40 PERCENT AMENDMENT WAS BASED ON A DISCUSSION BETWEEN MINISTER JOHN SMITH AND CONSERVATIVE SHADOW SPOKESMAN ON DEVOLUTION, FRANCIS PYM. PYM REPORTEDLY SAID HE SHARED THE GOVERNMENT'S VIEW THAT THE AMENDMENT WOULD GIVE ADDED IMPETUS TO THE SEPARATIST MOVEMENT IN SCOTLAND AND INDICATED THAT THE TORIES WOULD PROBABLY HELP TO RESCIND OR WATER IT DOWN WHEN THE BILL WAS REPORTED OUT OF COMMITTEE STAGES. IN THE EVENT, THE TORY FRONTBENCH MADE NO EFFORT TO AID THE GOVERNMENT, AND ONLY A FEW CONSERVATIVE MPS -- INSUFFICIENT TO OFFSET THE DEFECTIONS FROM LABOR'S RANKS -- VOTED WITH THE GOVERNMENT. THE PRESS IDENTIFIED SIX CONSERVATIVE MPS AS VOTING AGAINST THE AMENDMENT: FORMER LEADER HEATH, PETER

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WALKER, DAVID KNOX, ROBERT ADLEY, NICHOLAS SCOTT AND ALICK BUCHANAN-SMITH. ALTHOUGH OUR GOVERNMENT SOURCES

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 LONDON 02681

ARE NOT CERTAIN WHY THE CONSERVATIVE FRONTBENCH DECIDED NOT TO OPPOSE THE AMENDMENT, THEY BELIEVE IT WAS THE RESULT OF MRS. THATCHER'S OPPOSITION TO DEVOLUTION AND THE APPARENT FAILURE OF THE EXPECTED SCOTTISH BACKLASH TO DEVELOP.

3. THE PRESS ALSO REPORTED THAT THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY'S (SNP) MPS CAUCUSED IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE VOTE TO DETERMINE THEIR FUTURE POSTURE, AMID SPECULATION THAT THEY WOULD REFUSE TO SUPPORT THE SCOTLAND BILL ON FINAL READING AND DECIDE TO OPPOSE THE GOVERNMENT ON ANY CONFIDENCE ISSUES THAT MIGHT ARISE. AT THIS POINT NEITHER OF THESE CONTINGENCIES WOULD APPEAR TO BE A SERIOUS THREAT TO THE GOVERNMENT. THE BILL, AS AMENDED, IS STILL EXPECTED TO PASS THIRD READING, AND THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE SAFE AS LONG AS THE DEAL WITH THE LIBERALS HOLDS. AN SNP DECISION TO OPPOSE THE GOVERNMENT ACROSS THE BOARD, HOWEVER, WOULD MAKE IT MORE DIFFICULT FOR CALLAGHAN TO CARRY ON INTO THE CONFIDENTIAL

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L978-79 PARLIAMENTARY SESSION WITHOUT ANOTHER DEAL WITH THE LIBERALS. TO THAT EXTENT HIS LONGER-TERM GENERAL ELECTION OPTIONS WOULD BE REDUCED.

4. WHILE THE ANTICIPATED BACKLASH TO THE 40 PERCENT REQUIREMENT HAS NOT DEVELOPED AS YET, VARIOUS SCOTTISH MPS AND OTHER OBSERVERS CONTINUE TO BELIEVE PARLIAMENT'S QUALIFICATION OF THE SCOTTISH FRANCHISE IN THIS WAY WILL GIVE THE SNP AN ISSUE THEY CAN USE TO WHIP UP SEPARATIST FEELING AND WHICH COULD PROVIDE AN IMPORTANT ADVANTAGE IN A CLOSE ELECTORAL SITUATION. THE FORTH-COMING, BUT AS YET UNSCHEDULED, BY-ELECTION FOR THE GLASGOW GARGSCADEN SEAT VACATED BY THE DEATH OF THE LABOR INCUMBENT WILL PROVIDE AN OPPORTUNITY TO TEST THE LATTER POINT. ALTHOUGH LABOR WILL BE DEFENDING A 7,000 VOTE MAJORITY AGAINST THE SECOND PLACE SNP, THIS CONSTITUENCY IS NOW WIDELY CONSIDERED MARGINAL BECAUSE

THE SNP CARRIED IT IN THE LAST LOCAL ELECTION.

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